The Making of Spontaneity in a Work of Art

Pingdan 平淡, or ‘the even and plain’, is a tangible ideal in Song Dynasty art. Even a casual visitor to a Chinese art museum cannot fail to note that the exuberance of colour and vivid forms of life in Tang Dynasty artwork quickly recede to pale green Ru or snow-white Ding porcelains, recluses in abstract outlines and half hidden in a vast landscape, and calligraphic strokes that are almost eccentric. In general, if not always, Song art seems to represent someone coming of age and becoming self-conscious, no longer focused on sensual forms but seeking to discover the rules behind and beyond the phenomenal world. As a result, art acquired the taste for pingdan – once a pejorative word, in the Song it was found to represent the ideal of concealment or the riches of substance beneath a modest surface. Mastering a pingdan surface was seen as the highest achievement for poetry, calligraphy, and painting alike.

On exactly what was meant by pingdan, opinions differ. Zhu Xi regarded it as the simple (if cultivated) absence of artistic design; a novice poet should begin by emulating the pingdan style of ancient poets lest that his style became impure. In contrast, Su Shi saw it as the understated appearance beneath which there hid ultimate skill and strength; a matured poet would eventually ‘return’ to this state. As he advised his nephew in a letter:

As for writing in general, when you are young, you should make its aura lofty and steep, its colour vivid and splendid. When you age and mature, eventually your writing will achieve plainness. It is in fact not plainness, but ultimate splendour.

凡文字, 少小時須令氣象崢嶸, 采色絢爛, 漸老漸熟乃造平淡, 其實不是平淡, 絢爛之極也。5

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1 See Yoshikawa Kōjirō 吉川幸次郎, An Introduction to Sung Poetry, trans. Burton Watson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 35–8, where this term is translated as “calmness and ease”.
2 See Sturman, Mi Fu, 140–1, where this term is translated as “even and light”.
3 See Cahill, “Confucian Elements”, 98–9, where this term is glossed as “the virtue of concealment”.
4 Yang, “Zhu Xi as Poet”.
In other words, the appearance of naturalness was made by the highest craft, the kind that was capable of restraining itself. Su Shi followed his own advice by studying the limpid poetry of Tao Qian in the last decade of his life. What he found valuable in Tao was a ‘withered plainness’ (kudan 枯澹), defined as “withered outside and saturated inside; seemingly plain but rich in taste”.⁶

Charles Yim-tze Kwong argues that in understanding Tao Qian’s simplicity one should avoid two opposite assumptions: that simplicity means the absence of artistic design; and, antithetically, that all impressions of simplicity are fabricated. According to him, Tao’s simplicity is that of “a natural genius eminently capable of writing spontaneously under the hold of inspiration”.⁷ Su Shi’s understanding differed from any of the above assumptions. For him, simplicity or ‘plainness’ certainly did not mean the lack of design, nor was it purely fabricated. And, although his ‘gushing river’ metaphor bears resemblance to Kwong’s ‘natural genius’ theory, this chapter will examine Su Shi’s critical discourses on artistic composition and argue that he more often took a ‘gradualist’ approach to artistic excellence. For Su Shi, the appearance of spontaneity required deliberate practice as well as induced oblivion at the moment of composition. Ultimately, as he suggested in the “Record of Snow Hall” (Xuetang ji 雪堂記), the artist is lodged in a world of resemblance between the phenomenal and the void – a sanctuary for the dislocated. Since a ‘spontaneous’ work must be the unadorned articulation of the artist’s nature, the work becomes the artist’s substantiation. Furthermore, since Su understood human nature as imperfectible, the appearance of spontaneity would remain technically imperfect and individualistic, an empirical feature observed in Song Dynasty art.

The Emphasis on Practice

Su Shi’s writing on art often cites the Zhuangzi, as well as Buddhist sources. In the Zhuangzi, humble craftsmen often display the essence of the Way through their excellence in various crafts. Their attention is focused and their movements economic, reduced to exactly what is required for the perfect execution of the task. For A.C. Graham, a Zhuangzian craftsman is “spontaneous from the very center of his being”, and his motions “derive not from himself but from